



I can ignore that! - children developing self-regulation

Ben, five, is in the bathtub with his little sister having a 'tubby'. Sophie, two, starts blobbing soap on to the back of Ben's head. Ben does nothing. Sophie tries a few more dollops, then stops and starts playing with her toys. "Ben, what just happened?", I asked. He stated, "I was ignoring her."

What happened, indeed! Ben used self-regulation. That is, he managed his own behaviour, thinking and emotions. Previously, Ben would screech at his sister and complain to an adult that she was bugging him. The day before the 'tubby' incident, he and I had a discussion about how you can ignore some things and not let them bother you and often they just go away. It worked for both Ben and his sister. He learned that he didn't need to react to her actions and the younger child learned there are better ways to get her brother's attention.

Self-regulation is a powerful skill that has an important impact on children throughout their lives. Children with stronger self-regulation skills are frequently more successful in school. They persist with things longer and keep track of how they are doing. They also make friends more readily. They become more intrinsically motivated; that is, they enjoy doing things just for the challenge, interest or pleasure and not for rewards.

Babies learn that sucking their fingers, thumb or 'blankie' can help them sooth themselves - this is beginning self-regulation. Self-regulation doesn't occur over night or just in a few children. It starts early in life and continues into the adult years.

Through the preschool years, children learn to tolerate longer delays in getting what they want. They also learn more about how to control their hands - you find fewer unexpected things in the grocery cart when you go shopping with your child and his busy fingers. Children learn how and when to use a quieter voice even though they often forget.

They not only learn to control their bodies but also to manage their thinking. This includes being able to pay attention to certain things while ignoring others. It also involves keeping ideas in their minds while checking their own progress. Children learn to become more flexible in their thinking - they can deal more easily with not being able to wear favourite rain boots on a hot day. This also marks improvements in dealing with frustration and disappointment.

Developing self-regulation takes time, as well as support from parents and other adults. Some important ways to help include:

- giving children choices so they can start learning how to make decisions as well as how to live with them!
- respecting children's opinions so they can begin developing a sense of themselves. This also provides opportunities to talk about how your (whose?) opinions may be the same and how they may be different.

- explaining your thinking about why you make certain choices. This will help children learn to make good decisions as well as to accept a different view point.
- talking about your own self-regulation. For example, "I would love to have a donut right now but I don't want to spoil my supper", "I can just ignore that noise so it doesn't bug me", "oops, I made a mistake but that's okay because I can fix it up" or "I feel really disappointed that I didn't win but maybe next time I can."
- letting them make some 'slips' in self-regulation so you can discuss what they might do next time and how you might help remind them.

Make self-regulation an everyday topic. Notice and comment when it happens, as with Ben in the bath tub episode. Remind and discuss when self regulation doesn't happen so the children can learn from the experience. The most important thing to remember is that it takes approximately 20 years to develop basic self-regulation skills so each day will bring some improvements and some slips - just keep your perspective.

Dr. Heather MacKenzie is a speech-language pathologist who is passionate about helping children become the best adults they can. Her latest book is about helping children with autism and related conditions develop self-regulation skills. She can be reached through her website at www.drheathermackenzie.com



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